

four

# Quarters

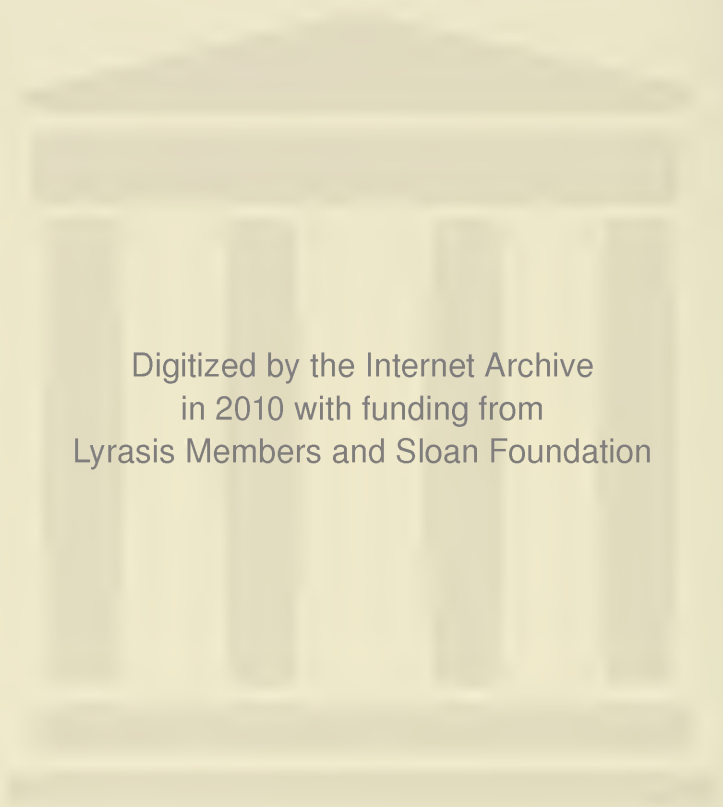
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november fifteenth, 1951

vol. I, no. 1 • fifty cents

Thirtieth Anniversary  
Issue



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# Four Quarters

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY THE FACULTY OF LA SALLE COLLEGE  
PHILA., PA. 19141

VOL. 31, NO. 1

AUTUMN, 1981

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*Four Quarters* (ISSN-0015-9107) is published quarterly in Autumn, Winter, Spring, Summer by the faculty of La Salle College, 20th & Olney Aves., Phila., Pa. 19141. Subscriptions: \$4.00 annually, \$7.00 for two years. © 1981 by La Salle College. Unsolicited manuscripts must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope. Available in Microform from Xerox University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106. Indexed in American Humanities Index and Index of American Periodical Verse. Second class postage paid at Philadelphia, Pa.

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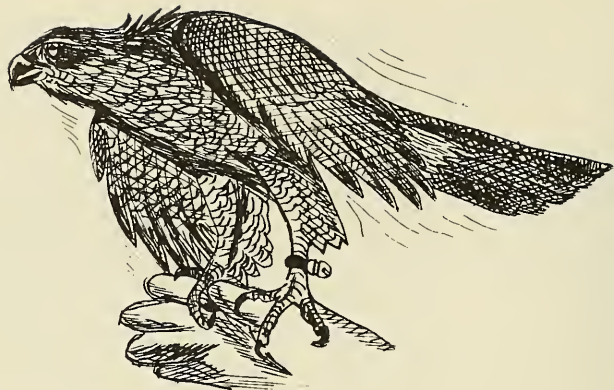
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## Catbird Seat

### TALENTED: I

In the early days of *Four Quarters*, which we'll be recalling especially in this our thirtieth year, the magazine, the English Department, and the College sponsored writing symposia and workshops. (The need for such a service decreased with the upsurge in such activities within the academy. Our commitment to it has continued in our Writing Program, as well as in *FQ*. We're proud of the many writers La Salle has produced and helped). These activities are based on the proposition that talent is not enough. It needs to be complemented by *technique*, the art of controlling the writer's resources and the reader's responses.

To maintain this commitment has not been easy in a land that has, especially over the last 20 years or so, assumed that talent—inborn ability—*is* enough. Americans are wild about talent; as a result, good art is hard to come by.

It is not new to say that this inclination comes from our frontier heritage: from the need to get it done, and get it done now, and the hell with finish. But now more than ever, the American public shows itself untrained, uneducated in the notion that finish is as essential to art as vitality or content.

The problem is the growing democratization of art. From Thor-

(continued on page 34)



# The Man in the Gazebo

PAT HAYWARD

**H**ELLO. PLEASE COME IN. Yes, I was expecting you; my wife told me last night that you would be coming 'round today. Please, sit down. I'm not sure I have it straight. You're not in the English department with Ellen? Oh, Psychology. I don't think she mentioned that. She said you wanted to have a look at our flowers? Oh, I understand now; gardening is your hobby. Well, I don't know that there's much to see here. The daffodils and jonquils are up, but the tulips are getting a slow start. Must have been that last snow we had. Of course, I don't know much about it, actually. Ellen was really the gardener before she went to work. I have plenty of time now, being retired; but I don't fuss with it much. Although I must say I do enjoy that vivid burst of color in the spring, especially at Easter. Yes, it's in just another week or so, isn't it? Well, I'm sure things will be blooming by then. Shall we go out to the back of the house? There is something I'd like to show you: my gazebo. I'm quite pleased with it. I spend a great deal of time there. Didn't Ellen tell you about it?

Here we are. I admit calling it a gazebo is a bit pretentious. Rather a grand name. I found this tarpaulin in the army surplus store, the hemp rope, too. It just seemed fitting somehow: these four trees already being at exactly the right angles for tying it up. It appealed to my engineer's mind.

Yes, I liked my work as an engineer.

Strictly speaking, of course, an old tarpaulin tied between four trees isn't a gazebo, is it? But the feeling is the same. It marks off a kind of space for me. I'm not really comfortable in the house. I've furnished the gazebo with these two chairs: one for me, one for a guest—please sit down—and this small table. I keep this bowl of oranges out here, navels, no seeds. And the lemons, for tea. Sometimes I have tea out here. I always have my pen knife with me to cut off a slice of the lemon for my tea. My father gave me this pen knife. I like it much better than the Swiss knife Ellen gave me one year. It doesn't have all that extra business: fork and spoon and corkscrew. Just two blades that stay remarkably sharp. It's simple, clean. And

useful. Like this gazebo.

Yes, it is strange not to be working. Well, at first it was. I hadn't expected retirement to come so soon. "Soon" is a relative term, I suppose. Something is always too "soon" when it catches you unawares, unprepared. It was as though my wife and I had been on a teeter-totter, balancing our days, our lives, when suddenly I got off. But instead of her side coming down—as happens with a real seesaw, you've seen it with children, one gets off and the other comes down with a heavy thud—she just stayed up there. I'm down here, in here; and she's up there, out there. I suppose I made the gazebo to provide an anchor for myself. I have to confess I was stunned by her energy. You've seen it, surely. She says you meet often in the faculty lounge. I always assumed she was happy here at home. Oh, she doesn't say she wasn't but that's how it is. You make assumptions, never question them. I guess I was startled by the turn-around in our lives.

Would you care for some tea? Perhaps later. Notice how the light filters down through the trees over there. Each ray of sunlight seems to awaken a new bud on the camellia bush. I have time to notice things like that now. Spring is a wonderful season, certainly appropriate for the celebration of Easter. Will you be going away for the holiday break? You have a private practice, too? Well, yes, hard to get away when patients are depending on you. I understand you talk about dreams in your line of work. Oh, I had dreams when I was young. Daydreams, I mean. Thoughts about what life was really all about. I guess I was pretty much of a loner. To tell the truth, I didn't have any friends. My roommate at college thought I was quite strange. I remember a time, I guess it was my first year at the university. Must be Easter coming up that's brought it back to me. Funny how old memories come back when you're sitting quietly, not having to do anything else but just sit quietly. It's like going into the attic of an old house and discovering forgotten remnants, a kind of reunion with yourself.

I can recall sitting on the edge of my bed. It was Easter vacation and everyone had left the dormitory except the janitor. I didn't want to go home, but they were closing the place, and I had no choice. I was a serious young man filled with questions, endless questions; and the lectures, the books, well, I felt such an excitement being at the university . . . . How can I describe it? It was like climbing out of a dark cellar into a garden lush with sunlight and color. You see, at home, with my father, it was silent and rather gray, I guess you could call it. He was an uneducated man. Oh, he read the newspapers, every bit of them down to the advertisements and obituaries, even of people he didn't know. But there were no books. And very little talk. My mother? She had died when I was



very little, so it was just my father and me. He was a strong man, broad-shouldered, large muscular hands. I don't think there had been a day in his life when he hadn't worked. Mostly semi-skilled labor, driving trucks and fork lifts, assembly lines of various sorts. But in a funny way he didn't look like that kind of worker; he was always so careful to keep his clothes clean and his hands free of dirt and meticulously manicured. He used this very pen knife, as a matter of fact, to clean his nails.

Well, as I said, there was a silence between my father and me. Not the kind of peaceful quietude I find here in the gazebo. Oh, and not an unspoken hostility, either. I don't mean to imply that . . .

At any rate, I was this serious young man full of questions and they didn't seem to be of a nature that interested my father. I remember once asking him if he believed in immortality. He answered quite simply that he didn't, that when you die, they put you in the ground, throw dirt in your face and that's the end of it. You smile. Perhaps you agree with him. The statement does have a certain power to it. But at the time, I felt as though a door had been slammed shut. It was the university that opened that door for me. Philosophy, history, art. All my questions were there; they had all been asked by the great thinkers of the past. It was really quite thrilling for me. I felt a little less alone, but, unfortunately, not less lonely. I was too shy to engage in discussions with my professors—I was in awe of them. And my classmates seemed only interested in learning what was going to be asked on the next examination. I was quite naive, I suppose. There I was wanting to know about God and the purpose of life when, according to my roommate, the important things were girls and the weekend football games. He had very little patience with me, my roommate. His name was Jock, an appropriate nickname. I've forgotten his real name. He was a fine athlete and, contrary to stereotype, a good student as well. Business major, I think. But Jock and I were as unsuited to each other as I felt my father and I were. He was a lively fellow, full of the here and now. Living in the present. And I . . . you could say I lived in a kind of time limbo. I wasn't attuned to the present, not in the same way Jock was; nor did I give thought to the future. And I really didn't think of myself as having a past, though I was fast developing a passion for the past as it was presented to me in my courses. I suppose that's why I took them so seriously. They gave me some kind of connection.

Perhaps you'd like tea now. Fine. It will just be a moment.

**H**ERE WE ARE. I'll just slice some lemon. You know, even though I have two chairs, you are actually the first guest I've had. No, my wife doesn't sit out here with me. She said I was a little crazy when I first put it up. One day I looked up at the house and saw

her watching me from the window. She seemed thoughtful, a kind of worried expression on her face. But she never said anything about the gazebo again.

Anyway, I was telling you about that Easter years ago. I was closing my suitcase, thinking how I'd rather stay at the university for the holiday, when the janitor came in to help me carry my things downstairs. I remember him quite well. A short, elderly black man, he walked slowly ahead of me. I noticed that the cuffs of his gray trousers were turned up several times, but still they dragged on the floor behind his heavy feet misshapen by bunions and callouses. I had seen him once sitting on a stool in front of the hallway broom closet rubbing his bare feet the way pilgrims rub the ancient statues of martyrs. Wrinkles had twisted his face into a permanently unreadable expression. After we had put my things in the trunk of my father's car, I watched the janitor walk back into the building. I remember thinking that if he were a painting, it would be called *The Stoic*.

My father's car was the perfect extension of himself. Immaculate and sturdy. It was an old dark green Plymouth. The original paint on the outside gleamed with dozens of carefully applied coats of wax. The original upholstery bore no stains, no rips. The ashtray, where his pipe rested, held only the most recent small pile of burnt tobacco. I knew that even under the hood the motor and the battery held not a speck of dust or grease that was more than a few days old. He drove it with great solicitude, never gunning it, never exceeding the speed limit. Now that I think about it, I suppose I was a little jealous of the care he gave that old car. No, he had never refused to let me drive it, but I don't think I asked for it very often. I was terrified of what might happen if I accidentally banged it up.

As we drove along my father asked me how school was going. Fine, I told him. And I reciprocated by asking him how work was. It was then I learned—he said it very firmly, with no emotion—that he had been laid off. I knew what that meant to a man like my father, to whom work was everything. And yet, I didn't know what to say to him. I really didn't know. Perhaps he didn't expect me to say anything. I looked at him and thought that he was probably as much a stoic as the old janitor.

It occurs to me that my father was just about the age that I am now . . . .

When we arrived at his house that afternoon, my father went to the kitchen and put on the kettle to boil water for tea. Most of my life I've drunk coffee. But tea seems somehow more fitting in the gazebo, don't you think? Yes, well, my father's house was just like his car, not as spic and span, but neat, orderly. Though I had lived there all my life, I felt like a trespasser. Truth be told, I guess I had always

felt something like that. I walked through the rooms; it was a small house. The Early American furniture; the crocheted doilies under the lamps; the dusty, dimstore knicknacks; the magazine pictures slipped into cheap frames: I was startled to realize suddenly that all were echoes of my mother. None of it was my father's, none of it mine. It became so clear that he and I had lived in that house without ever having touched it. Even as I tell you this, I get a strange, empty feeling. No, I didn't know much about my mother. And he never talked about her.

Well, I knew I was going to be perfectly miserable spending my vacation there. The silence between my father and me, the lifeless quality of the house. Yes, I was feeling pretty sorry for myself. And remember, he was the one out of a job. But he never complained about it. Every morning he read the ads, called a few places, even went on a couple of interviews, I think.

I spent most of my time preparing a paper for my Art History course. We were asked to pick a fifteenth century Italian painting and analyze it. I had picked *The Resurrection* by Piero della Francesca. Do you know it? Oh, it's a powerful piece, yes, extremely powerful. Not like other paintings where Christ is shown sort of floating in the sky ascending to heaven. In this painting, the artist chooses a much more interesting moment. There is Christ just as he steps out of his tomb. He is large and imposing; his gaze is steady, fixed straight ahead; his body is strong, solid, earthy. He is standing behind a low, stone wall, his left foot raised and planted firmly on top of the wall in front of which are the guards sprawling in sleep, oblivious to the miraculous event of which they are a part.

I became profoundly absorbed with the painting. I'd stare at it for hours; and as I wrote my ideas, I felt as though I were on the verge of some wonderful discovery. It was like a mystery gradually becoming clear to me. The point that I was trying to make in the paper was that by choosing to depict Christ's resurrection with such physical intensity, the artist had touched the depths of the central paradox of Christianity. Do you follow me? Let me put it this way: how does the artist portray an event which all of our knowledge and experience tells us cannot happen, but which is an article of faith that is absolutely crucial to the structure of the religion itself? Moreover, how does the painter, using exclusively aesthetic means *reinforce* belief in resurrection? It seemed to me that della Francesca successfully answered these questions precisely because he chose to describe the spiritual event in a totally unambiguously *physical* way, thereby capturing the tension that one emotionally experiences when one accepts faith in the resurrection of Christ.

I remember feeling a great excitement when I finished the paper. It's strange, you know, I can see myself sitting at the desk in



my old bedroom, putting the the sheets together in a folder; and I glanced up, saw the calendar and realized that the next day was Easter! I became ecstatic. It all seemed to come together for me. I experienced a kind of—what shall I say?—a kind of connection. I felt a wholeness, a completeness.

You understand, of course, that I was not a Christian. My father had reared me with no religious training of any kind. I had no idea whether he believed in God or not. I wasn't sure if I believed either. The ideas stirred up in my head by what I was hearing and learning at the university were all so very new to me.

But that moment, at my desk . . . it was an overwhelming experience. I wasn't certain of what was happening to me. I only felt this strange and marvelous excitement. A thrill, really. And then I did something that, now looking back on it, strikes me as very odd. I took my small reproduction of the painting and my paper into the kitchen. My father was sitting at the table reading the classified section of the newspaper. He had a curious habit of pushing his glasses to the top of his head when he read. And he always folded the paper vertically. I remember I pushed the paper aside, and laid the painting of Christ in front of him and began talking very fast—I was so very excited, you see—and I told him he was wrong about their throwing dirt in your face and that was the end of it. Here, this painting shows that resurrection is real. My paper, here Father, proves it—If resurrection was real for Jesus Christ, it is real for all of us—For you, Father, for me, for mother—We can be together—We can start over—We can start over—We can talk—We have another chance, Father! I know I'm shouting, Father, I'm sorry—Let me embrace you—No, no, please don't pull away—Believe me, Father—It's true. It's true—Love me, Father—Don't leave me, please—For the love of God—Love me, Father . . .

**P**LEASE, EXCUSE ME. I . . . I didn't know I would break down like that. I've . . . I've embarrassed you. I'm really sorry. No, no. You're very kind. Thank you. I'm quite all right now. Strange, isn't it? I had no idea remembering that little scene with my father would make me so emotional. I'm not an emotional man, really. You smile. Well, yes, I suppose I was emotional then. Yes, that is true; of course, I was young, very young. It was a long time ago. I'm not sure what stirred up that old memory. I haven't thought about my father in years. Easter coming in a few days, I suppose.

What happened? Oh, yes, well, after my vacation I returned to the university, and I think it was the next semester I changed my major to engineering. Good thing, too. Engineering has been very good to me. Even if my wife hadn't gone to work, my pension would

have done us very nicely.

Oh, you mean what happened then, in my father's kitchen. Nothing really. I became a bit hysterical, I suppose. No, I don't recall that he did anything. I suppose it took me a moment or two to get hold of myself. Yes, I remember getting myself under control; and when I went to look for my father, he was outside waxing the old Plymouth. No, I don't remember anything else, just that the day after Easter I went back to school.

Care for a slice of orange? This pen knife? Did I say my father gave it to me? Well, that's not exactly right. I found it on his dresser after he died and just, well, took it. It's quite handy.

I'm pleased to have met you, too. Yes, of course, I'd like to see you again. Next Tuesday? That would be fine.

It's a pleasant little gazebo, don't you think? Marks out the space quite nicely.

## Clearing Maybe

SISTER MARY LUCINA

A canary, first you've seen  
out of a cage, leaves a branch  
and dips over your head  
before flying over a field  
of corn, wondering why the ears  
can't lift into the sky.  
A book slides off your lap.  
Wind turns pages the way  
a calendar turns after 40.

Grass cut this morning makes  
it easier to find something shiny  
believed lost. Your hand climbs  
a hill of trees along Route 5,  
muffler of cars  
going to Rochester and Buffalo.  
Summer is gone quick as a minnow;  
leaves start rounding up autumn.

Radio says clear tonight.  
You think of stars, not sure if they  
are periods of dark sentences  
signalling a skyful of beginnings.



# Stranger

*for Susan Talanda*

BOB FAUTEUX

All my life, and today too,  
I have spoken this language  
like a foreigner,  
and they do not understand me.

Sometimes I have trouble buying things.  
The grocer stocks white mice for me  
and the barber offers me a bargain  
in fishing poles and tennis shoes.  
When I try to clarify my needs,  
they laugh and assure me with a wink  
that they do not understand me.

Once, at a dinner with the mayor,  
when I promised him my vote,  
he grabbed his lapels  
and pulled them over his face.  
The police escorted me to the door.

Last Friday, under a green sky,  
when I told a woman I loved her,  
she curled her lip and barked.

I know it is my fault.  
With my limited vocabulary,  
I cannot round a meaning  
with the word that fits  
like a measured board.  
If she is beautiful, I say so,  
and never call her lovely,  
exquisite or charming.  
If I am wrong, I admit it  
without resorting to disclaimers  
like naive, ill-chosen or hasty.  
If you are wrong,  
I tell you too.

You are wrong.

# Stereo

LEWIS HORNE

TWO DAYS AFTER CHRISTMAS, Watt and Tina Merrit, bundled in scarves, mittens, and second-hand furs, hurried through the downtown shopping area. A wind blew into their reddened faces, brutally painful in the twenty-five below weather. Tina huddled close to the buildings where she found bare patches of cement to walk on. She could scarcely keep up with Watt's long-legged stride, nor was she sure of foot on icy sidewalks the way he was—a basketball player in his youth, a skater all his life. Yet it was too cold to slow up, and they rushed along the icy walk with five or six feet of space between them.

Before they reached Saner's Stereo, her forehead and cheekbones were sore with cold. She felt they could be chipped away like a sculptor's marble. Watt must feel the same. Yet he held the door for her. Inside, she unbuttoned her coat, loosened her scarf, removed her mittens. She smiled her relief at her husband, but he was busy wiping his glasses, his moustache frosty and his thin lips chapped, and he did not observe her gratitude. She shook her hair free from the cap she wore.

"They look expensive, don't they?" she said as they turned to a display of turntables and amplifiers. Sansui. Sony. Akai.

In the back of the store were bins of brightly colored albums—rows of folk, rock, a few classical. A rug softened their footsteps, though rock music playing over hidden speakers kept their conversation private. The price tags intimidated, even the red sale prices inked on white cards. It was the year-end sale, advertised in the newspaper, that had drawn them here.

Watt frowned without answering, deepening the two lines that rose from where his dark eyebrows met. Then with his hand he appeared to wipe them away as he smoothed back his straight hair, somewhat tangled from his toque.

"Can I help you?"

The thin young man who spoke was no taller than she. His voice, somewhat high-pitched, was pleasant and cut across the music that was playing.

"Watt?" she said, when he didn't answer.

"Yeah." He took a deep breath, almost as though he were sighing, as though he had to prepare himself to break silence. When he spoke, his voice rumbled harshly, as though the muscles were stiff from lack of use. "Our situation—well, we have two speakers that we think work . . . . Our amplifier isn't working, but we hope they do—the speakers . . . . So we need something to go with them. We were thinking about a turntable and amplifier. Our turntable's shot."

"Fine." The young salesman held his hands apart, poised, until Watt finished. He had thin fingers with groomed nails that made her think of Watt's bony hands, half buried in his crossed arms—bandaids on the thumb of his left hand and two fingers of his right, the nails bitten down so far that blood was drawn, fingers made painful enough that he had to protect them with tape. "What kind of speakers do you have? Perhaps we can work from there."

He was a friendly and energetic young man, his moustache much thicker than Watt's, much wider, his upper teeth protruding somewhat, a bit rabbity. They rested on his lower lip. He wore high-heeled shoes and flared jeans. His hair came not quite to his collar. The top buttons of his shirt were undone so that his chest showed, smooth and hairless and still tanned. She felt charmed somehow by him.

He flipped through a book looking for information about their speakers.

"How old did you say they were?"

"Ten years."

"Oh, wow." He called to an older man, "You ever heard of—" And he named model and number.

"Sixty-five per," said the man.

"You're running into money there. That was before my time."

She took Watt's arm. "They were a wedding present," she said.

From Watt's older brother. "The successful member of the family," Watt would always say about Del, his "big" brother.

"And they were expensive at the time," she added, regretting the words as soon as she heard herself say them. To her relief, the muscles in Watt's arm did not tighten. She'd wondered if Del wasn't showing off, trying to impress his little brother, when he gave them the set. For whose sake? Not for Watt's new nurse wife. She had scarcely known Del at the time and was quite intimidated by his smooth manners, his towering dark presence. She had left her questions about her brother-in-law unasked, though, and luxuriated in the beautiful sound that filled their small apartment, took loving care of that expensive machinery.

Strangely, Watt didn't. Though he liked music. They were still in school at the time, Watt trying to write a dissertation on "Silence,

Word, and Sacrament in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins." She came on the first of Watt's silences then, his brooding. She took them at first as moments of concentration, of meditation and musing. When he said, "Honey, can you turn that machine off when I'm working?" she removed the record, happy enough in the evening during her first pregnancy to doze and read. Comfortable in Watt's presence. But Watt had never liked the set. Even less as his work on Hopkins came slowly apart. Why the thesis failed, she never knew. "The topic's too unwieldy," Watt said. Or, "I don't have an argument." Or, "I can't pull it together." And finally, "What difference does it make? If you fail, you admit it. You pack it in." Del was the first person he told. Del suggested he pull together his credits and get an MA in business. "At least you'll make a living."

Tina argued. "But Del doesn't know everything."

"What do you suggest, then?"

She had no suggestions. She felt helpless, much like their baby in his crib. "Oh, honey, I just want you to be happy." So we can all be happy, she added to herself.

For a while then they both listened to music. Watt like his new classes better than he thought he would. During dinner, he would play chamber music on the stereo set. It never waked the baby.

"And your amplifier?" said the young man.

"It's not working either," said Watt. She saw the ghost of a smile on his face. "It's a Sansui. A lot of static and no power. We brought it in here to be worked on, and it came back worse than before."

The young man showed surprise.

Tina said, "We were told to take it to a little shop on Third Avenue."

"I don't understand." Hands turned out in astonishment. The way he used them, the flexibility of each finger, reminded Tina of the versatile gestures of a young magician she'd seen on television. "We take care of our own work. I heard some strange stories when I came here. But no one should have sent you away. We handle Sansui."

Watt shrugged.

"Let me show you some turntables."

Each of them looked to Tina groomed and efficient and alien—like all new machines. A sleekness in the curve of the tone arm. A power in the wide disc. "Genuine rubber," the salesman said, pulling off the round pad. "All parts sealed." She hoped Watt understood the details. She hoped he was listening. Sometimes he became so abstracted, so withdrawn. Even sitting across the table from her, his face sober, when she pushed past the brief unintelligible murmur of his response, she'd find he'd heard nothing she'd said. He didn't hear the children either, noisy as the two of them could be.



"We should have a fully automatic," he said. "We've got two kids at home. Don't you think so?"

He turned to her. Momentarily, his face was almost a stranger's, his dark eyes peering down at her in a way that made her feel she was another wife, he another husband, the two of them playing out some special little scene before this charming young man. The two of them—a lower middle-class couple with limited funds, approaching middle age . . . Gray hair in Watt's temples. Lines scarring his cheeks. Those two vertical lines printed once more in his forehead.

"Oh yes," she said. And then in an effort to give the two of them their own name again, she added, "Our twelve-year-old boy likes to take things apart and put them back together."

"Ah, but he'd have a hard time with this machine. I understand what you mean, though. I was the same way till my father turned me on to cars. He runs a garage."

Watt smiled suddenly, naturally. He was listening. He was again her husband, and she was Tina Merrit.

He'd blamed Rick for what went wrong with the set Del gave them. Tina thought Rick was old enough at six to put on some of his children's records by himself. "On that machine?" Watt cried. "Can you imagine what Del would say?"

"It's ours. He gave it to us."

"Exactly. If we break it, he'll think it's only natural. Anything I get hold of, he'll say."

But something had happened, whether it was Rick or a worn part. Something went wrong with the tone arm. It began to grind. It failed to turn off.

"Oh, Jesus," Watt said.

He took the turntable to three different places in town. "When you've got a delicate mechanism like this . . ." the repairmen would say.

She asked him, "Would you like me to take it this time?"

"Just forget it," he said.

So they had. The machine sat. The records stood on the shelves. Tina dusted each part regularly. But all were silent.

"Let me show you some combinations," said the young man. "Like these speakers . . . Have you thought of what you can do with speakers? A friend of mine is hanging his with macramé. And my girl friend—I set up hers over the closet. She thought I was crazy, but that way, the sound, you see—" he pointed toward an upper corner—"the kinds of walls you have . . . You can get radically different qualities of sound."

**T**INA BELIEVED THE CAUSE of Watt's withdrawal was too complex for her to understand. When she first met him, he was



reticent, even somber. He gave the impression of emotional depths, even of mystery. Partly because he was a loner. Partly because he was such a perfectionist, had such a passion for order, tidiness. She recognized difficulties, but the recognition came out of her own fascination with the tall man she saw at concerts, the graduate student who swam daily in the Physical Education pool and practiced with the University Chorus every Monday and Thursday evenings. She saw some signals in the way his thin mouth tightened when Rick and Jana quarreled, in the way he withheld comment about their clutter and her occasional carelessness in cleaning, in the way he would storm through the house wordlessly at times, cramming loose objects into a plastic garbage bag that she would—quietly, surreptitiously—have to save and sort.

“You should have finished your business MA,” Del had told him. “You only had one more semester.”

“I didn’t have any job. I had a family,” said Watt.

“I never understood why you didn’t finish that Hopkins thesis. You could have pulled something together! Besides, I offered to loan you the money. Drop out of two programs. Jesus!”

“I don’t like debts.”

“What do you have now? Working in the City Clerk’s office. But never mind. I don’t mean to be critical. I’m sorry.”

“You say your amplifier doesn’t work?” asked the salesman.

“That was the next thing to go. It gives forty-five watts per channel. I know that much.”

“We could listen to FM for a while,” said Tina. “And that was nice.” While it lasted. A friend told them the problem could be transistors. But the repairman on Third Avenue could never solve it.

“Let me show you how these work. I’ll hook up to two different sets of speakers.” He pointed to the two pairs on opposite sides of the area, motioned as though his hands sculpted—efficiently—a shape in air. Watt’s arms were still crossed over his thin chest. “What I’m going to do is put on a record. You can see how the machine plays. The forty-five watt amp here should be enough to drive your speakers.” His body moved confidently as a dancer’s.

The rock music from the back of the store ended.

And in the silence she heard Watt’s breathing. Was hers so loud? she wondered. When Watt was gone, every sound had been loud. When he called that evening, her voice had grown loud in the quiet that made a desert around her, standing there, staring at the telephone dial on the wall, at their own area code and number.

“I won’t be home.”

“You’re working late?” she asked.

“No. I won’t be home.”

"What time then?"

"Not tonight. I won't be home."

The meaning of what he was saying, what she hadn't wanted to think he was saying and yet knew, pushed its way through and she remembered how he'd lunged out the door that morning without speaking, forgetting his lunch, forgetting to kiss Jana—and her . . . . Something had finally happened.

"Watt, when are you coming home?"

"I don't know."

And she remembered how she'd gotten after him the previous night before they went to bed. Why didn't he ever say anything? Did he think it was easy for her? How long was she supposed to go on blaming herself? "You're not to blame . . ." Then who was? What was? Sometimes she didn't know what to do, the way he never talked . . . .

She should never have said anything.

"Watt . . . ."

Her voice died away. But she didn't hang up. Neither did he.

"Please . . . ."

"No," he said. "No."

How long did she stand there, the telephone in her hand, Watt silent on the other end, sitting, she imagined, in his empty office? She didn't know what to say. Or rather she could think of too many things to say, but she was afraid to say them, to spill them into that black mouthpiece. Sometimes she thought she was too dependent on him and he resented it. Lord knows, she didn't want to be. She could hear his breathing as he waited for her—no, not to speak. She was afraid he wouldn't listen to her if she did. He was waiting for her to hang up, and she recalled—as she realized that—how formally polite he could so often be.

Call me, she wanted to say. Please. To say goodbye was too final. So she placed the phone on its hook without saying anything.

"Where can I reach you?"

She'd forgotten to ask.

How quiet the next few days were—even with the noisy questions Rick and Jana posed—she'd never forget. "Your father's gone out of town," she told them. "To a meeting." She told their friends the same thing, sometimes saying it before the conversation demanded, hoping they wouldn't see him on the street. To her it was essential that no one know. Once she told someone else, admitted it to them, then his leaving would be irrevocable.

He didn't call again. The fourth day she couldn't help herself and called him at work. "I'm busy now," he said. She could hear the hum of voices, the clatter of office machines in the background.

"Will you call me?"

"I'll try to get time," he said in a tone of voice that made her feel anonymous.

"Where are you staying?"

"I'll get in touch with you as soon as I can."

Two days later she couldn't stop and drove to the City Hall after it closed. Perhaps he was staying late. Perhaps she could see him alone in the large room warren'd by partitions and desks. The office was locked, though the light was on. The window in the door was too opaque to see who was inside. She knocked softly. The hallways of the old building echoed—the tile was scarred, in need of buffing. Suppose someone should see her? Suddenly nervous, she yanked a piece of paper from a bulletin board. Turning it over she wrote with a ballpoint pen: *Watt. Please come home.* What else? Write of her weariness, her weakness? She couldn't eat, sleep. With a thumbtack from the board, she pinned it to the door. But as she turned away, it loomed in the corner of her eye—the large white sheet of paper, the message for anyone to read . . . Oh, dear God . . . With her eyes starting to mist, she turned the bottom half up, retacking it, and then fearful of meeting a janitor, hurried out of the building.

**H**E CAME BACK two days later. Snow had fallen overnight. Rick had not yet shovelled the walk. Large footprints packed what had gathered on the front steps. He was full of apology, wiping her tears for her. He didn't know what was wrong with him, why things were bothering him. He had thought he could lick it himself, he said. Now he'd decided he should get professional help. He'd made an appointment . . .

"Forgive me," he said.

Then as Christmas approached, he said, "Why don't we try again? See if we can do something about the stereo set. The one Del gave us."

The young salesman extracted a record, flourished it a moment between his fingers. He sprayed a brush and wiped the record. The sound was loud and jarring. Disco.

"Do you have something symphonic?" she asked.

"Sure." He flipped through the records. "Mozart?"

That lovely sound filled the space around her. One set of speakers was deeper and more resonant than the other. But from whichever set it came, the music glowed, shimmered, like something luminous. The clarinet entered with a smoothness of tone one could touch. Del had given them the concerto, and it had remained a favorite of hers. What chance brought the young man to pull this record from his assortment?

Hearing the music returned her to the apartment she and Watt

had first rented, to the day they brought Rick home from the hospital, a new baby, to the day they finally bought their house . . . . But more than that the music—as such music always did with its textures and melody, its spiritual impact—lifted her.

Watt turned, his tight smile carrying through a full line of melody.

A few minutes later, as the young man busied himself so they'd have a chance to talk, Watt asked, "What do you think?"

"It's such an expensive turntable. And our amplifier doesn't work. We need both."

"I think we should try once more to fix the amplifier," Watt said. "And I think we should buy the turntable now."

Certainly, said the young salesman, he'd be happy to have them bring the amplifier in. He could take a look at it, give them an estimate. That might, indeed, be the wisest thing to do . . . .

Tina waited in the store while the salesman boxed up the turntable and Watt brought the car around.

"We'll be back with the amplifier this afternoon," she said.

"Fine." His teeth under his moustache were white on his lower lip. How was it his smile, his gestures, his speech seemed to touch her directly? To move so easily, comfortably, across space? "That will be fine. Do you listen to a lot of symphonic music?"

"We used to."

"Well, if your amplifier works, maybe you can listen some more."

She shivered as she climbed into the cold car. "Watt, do you really think they can fix it?"

The car heater hummed. More cars moved on the snowpacked street now; vapor puffed from exhausts, misting the air. He was so quiet for so long, she thought he'd not heard her. At a stoplight, he touched her gloved hand briefly. "We won't know until we try."

She nodded, sliding closer to him as the car warmed.

## Letter From A Ward

R. L. BARTH

Commandoes empty of your manhood, cease  
Prowling over this unlit no-man's land  
And leave me, if not consolation, peace.  
Go down among the Picts,

Spartans, and Roman legionaries, hidden  
In a whirl of brackish vapors: a rowdy band  
Boasting of bawdry and of war, wine-sodden,  
Bivouacked along the Styx.



# Homecoming

DEREK DAVIS

A PUPPY PLAYED RAGTAG with a small piece of cloth in its mouth, growling insistently. John Arnold Shackleton looked down at it with envy. Pounce, tear, run, pounce again. He hadn't pounced in ages. A year or so earlier his mind at least had pounced, but now, despite an occasional gambol, it moved along at a tempered pace. His mental vision had become blurred at the edges; he could look only at thoughts presented dead center.

The woman who entered from the opposite end of the room presented a fierce contrast to the dog. She was old with a face of more than classic age, almost a witch's visage, with stretched skin and jutting jaw. Her eyes were both sunken and prominent behind the yellow polish of her cheekbones. How does this happen, wondered John A. Do chins form outgrowths with age or does the flesh retreat so drastically that the true outlines appear only when truth is no longer required?

"John A, it's good to see you." She looked honestly pleased. He could think of no reason why she should be. She advanced on him with surprising speed and grace. He was afraid he would be offered one of those horrid cheeks to buss, but instead she proffered her hand, shaking his with a firm, steady grip.

"Sit there, that's a very comfortable chair." She pointed to a dowager Victorian piece with massive wings which curled around the sitter like blinders on a horse. Yet it was a chair which would bear no nonsense. To his relief it *was* comfortable, very comfortable, holding him with the loving remove of mothers from former generations. Across from him, on a modern, utilitarian sofa, his aunt poured tea from a stout black pot without ornament. It was a device to be used, not to be looked at. She kept the requisite china cabinet of family heirlooms, but she never served from them. She held them in trust and considered them a minor nuisance.

"I don't suppose you think of yourself as having favored-nephew status?"

"No."

"Good. I haven't asked you here to talk of inheritances."



"I never think about that."

She had a clear laugh, but not quite pleasant. There seemed to be a flaw in its inspiration. "You know, I did once consider that it would be a lark to leave the bulk of my things to you. I had the idea that I would gain a sort of posthumous glee in seeing your confusion as to what to do with it. *But*, though such thoughts are comfortably romantic, they are hardly practical. You wouldn't know what to do with it, would you?"

"No. Not with very much of it."

The puppy pulled at the hem of her dress. She reached down and scooped it up with another unexpectedly fluid motion. There was no trembling, no indecisiveness. The waxen face looked more than ever out of place. John A had a momentary fear that he faced a changling, an imp who would throw off its mask and demand his soul. The chair soothed him. She was simply a spry old lady. People said that of her: "A spry old lady."

"John A, I need someone to live here with me."

Did he have the look of a procurer of geriatric companions? This could be more ghastly than he had imagined.

"Auntie, I don't know anyone who—"

"No, no, I mean you."

"What? To live with you? To live here . . . good lord, Auntie, why would you want that?"

"I don't know. I mean that, I have no sensible idea. But I do have the urge, and I have come to trust my inclinations these days as I never did before. I have been feeling especially—marvelously in fact—clear-headed. I've heard brain upheavals can produce strange clarities as precursors. But it has been a matter of months now—no visions, no voices, no feelings of external manipulation by cosmic forces, mind you—just the sort of thing we have all experienced on very clear mornings, only extended over periods of days and weeks. If I had known that old age would be like this I would have put in for it earlier. Why do you think such a situation would be delayed until a time in life when it seems of least use? Or is there simply nothing left at my age but clarity? It has almost the quality of a toy to it, one of those giveaways in a cereal box. The Maker has strange ideas I must say, but they are grand ones to live through. This one is, at any rate."

John A was immobilized by his own amazement and by the conventions of social behavior. You could not run away from your aunt no matter what she might be saying. Neither, in this instance, could he reply. He was being asked to make a sacrifice for family's sake, something he had avoided with a front of mute passivity all his life. He wanted nothing of them; they should have the grace to want nothing in return.

"Come get your tea. It's a very nice Lapsang Souchong, you know, the smoky kind. Do you like it?"

"I don't know. I mean I have, sometimes. Uh, sugar, do you have . . . ?"

"Of course, milk too if you'd like, though I find it makes a tea like this insipid. I have an odd feeling right back here, between the shoulders, when I put milk in strong tea. Do you ever have anything like that?"

He could no longer confine his growing astonishment, which burst from him like a liquid. "I do. Yes. I thought . . . most people would think that very strange, wouldn't they? I never mention it." He was ashamed to think of his feelings flowing uncontrolled around the room.

"When you are old and it no longer matters, and you are feeling clear-headed for whatever reason, then it becomes very easy to mention such things. Really, come get your tea."

He stood up, bucking the restraints of the chair, and picked up the cup from the table. This close to his aunt he suffered near-paralysis. When he did step backwards, he drew up too sharply against the chair and was thrown into the seat, slopping tea into the saucer and a small amount onto his pants. Mercifully, his aunt said nothing. The tea was brewed perfectly. Lapsang was his favorite, he couldn't imagine why he had been unable to say so. The warm tannin soothed his stomach. He could talk his way through this; there had been no reason to panic. He used to think his way out of situations much more calmly. At the age of forty-three he had no excuse for letting his brain go to sleep. Someone had recommended meditation to him, but if he understood it clearly, meditation was a method used to blank out the mind altogether.

"**W**ELL, WHAT DO YOU think of my plan?" His aunt stroked the puppy absently.

"I have an apartment—you've never seen it, have you? It's set up in a . . . a very *friendly* way. Everything's where I want it to be and I can reach things easily. It would be hard to give up anything like that, even for such a—"

"Don't spout nonsense, John A. I know there can't be anything very appealing to you about this place. This is set up to serve *me* in a very friendly way; it wouldn't mean a thing to anyone else. but I do think we could work it out together. Oh, you have all those awful collections, don't you?"

"Yes, I don't suppose there would be any way to fit them in here and I am fond—I mean, they're necessary to me. The snake skins are all perfect examples of full-shed skins. I never keep the torn ones. I suppose, ha ha, it's hard to believe that there can be groups of people who trade in that sort of knowledge, whole, uh, societies devoted to

obscure branches of knowledge, such as that. Not the skins, but snakes and their habits. Well, snakes aren't that obscure. Shrews though, shrews . . . shrews aren't obscure, but they *are* very hard to catch and you can get bitten . . . This is a shrew bite scar." He held up his left index finger, on which, if one looked very closely, one might notice a minute white line next to the nail. His aunt could see nothing from where she sat and made no pretense of looking. "These things, I don't make my living at them, but there's my reputation involved. I couldn't leave them anywhere or store them. Some of them smell a bit if you get close to them."

"I wouldn't."

"I guess it just wouldn't work out."

"There are always ways to make adjustments. That's one of the things I see most clearly. It's almost as if I could actually see—lines of force, is that what they're called?—moving back and forth, so that I could follow them in one direction or another. Perhaps your snakes have some similar sense and that is why they make the S-curves they do."

"No, that has to do with musculature, a way of getting the maximum amount of gripping force against the ground. If they simply went straight ahead they wouldn't be able to extend themselves over enough area to—"

"I won't listen to any sort of serpent lectures unless you agree to move in here with me."

"Auntie, I can't. I couldn't."

The taut face lost its composure. She did not look spry. "No, I suppose not. I said that I don't have visions, but the idea of your moving here, that was something very near a vision, a thought which struck from . . . I don't know where. I've never understood what all those collections were to you, but they may be what my thoughts are to me. I collect ways of looking at things. What are your other collections? Non-smelly items, I mean."

John A moved forward in the chair, then back again. "Small things mostly, because I never have had much space. Slogans, I think I like them the best of my collections—old political slogans and commercials, sayings from World War I, *Carthago Delenda Est*, that kind of thing. I have a hundred -fifty 'down-withs' alone. It all fits into a drawer. One or two posters for effect, but it's what was said that I care about, not the form it took. The snake skins are my formalist side. I guess I collect outlooks too, but other people's. I don't have much of an outlook of my own when you get down to it." Self-pity rolled in like mist. Wisps of acrimony explored his nostrils. He had the urge to cry and throw old china.

"Everyone says that of you, but I find it hard to accept. Collecting is certainly an outlook, the outlook that there are things in life worth salvaging, that humanity has produced thoughts which

are timeless. That no two items in nature are the same and that it would be very nice if all of them were saved."

"It implies all that?"

"At the very least."

"Auntie, I am a sad and unhappy person; you wouldn't want me around. Collecting also implies the terror of leaving empty space where futility can gather. My mind has been getting fuzzy. I read that we lose a hundred thousand brain cells a day. Dead, I mean, never replaced. A few are probably memories which get holes in them, but I think in my case my thought processes are shrinking."

"Mine should be the size of a pea then, and I don't see it happening. Did you ever read interviews with Pablo Casals when he was ninety? As vital as this puppy. I do find that I sleep more. Perhaps only the night cells die, so that you have to spend more time accumulating the same amount of rest and dreams."

"I have to leave."

"Oh."

"There's an auction and I think they may have snake skins. A herpetologist died and that kind of thing usually isn't picked up by his heirs. Sometimes they're even thrown out." He spoke with the horror of an archaeologist thinking about the Visigoths.

"Would you like to have this puppy?"

"To keep?"

"Yes. I think he still has another month of real play in him and then he would be a very nice dog. He's a mongrel. I don't think he will grow to be very large."

"But . . . he's your dog."

"I don't think of it as owning a dog, but as keeping one healthy and holding it, possibly for someone else, possibly for its own old age. A dog wouldn't think he was owning me. It should be give and take."

"I've never owned—had—a dog. They have to be walked on some sort of schedule, don't they? And they get unhappy if they're left alone in an apartment? I work all day. I don't even know if I'm allowed pets."

"Is it one of those large buildings?"

"No, just a row house, but the landlord doesn't live there. What would I do with a dog?" He directed this not at his aunt, but at some mystified area in himself which could not picture the actions one took in relation to a dog.

"You could use him as the nucleus of a dog collection."

"A dog collection?"

"Dead shrews, the dead skins of snakes—wouldn't it be a pleasure to have a collection of live things for a change?"

"A zoo? Dogs don't live very long, I would end up with dead dogs



anyway. I'd have to bury them somewhere. Or have them stuffed. There's no room for a dog collection." He was suddenly aware of the wings of the chair hemming him in; then his musings on a dog collection were rent everywhere by an explosion. His own internal blinders blew away and his mind confronted a vista extending far to the right and left, as it had extended when he was young. No, further, for he saw fewer clumps of obscuring shrubbery, the weeds of preconception and the undergrowth of ignorance. Only the wings of the chair. He leaned forward to be free of them and his eyes and mind were filled with the glory of his aunt's busy wallpaper. Flecks of gold and silver danced in and out of small violet clusters. The wallpaper was a vast, evenly-spaced collection of the two-dimensional representations of flowers, all precisely the same. For the first time he understood Victorian fancy, the comfort of a home which treasured the obvious. His aunt, sitting on the sofa, gave off a radiance. What had she said about the clarity of stroke victims? His head did have a ringing sound. No, the *awareness* of sound. His mouth must be hanging open, making him look extremely foolish. The thought pleased him. His aunt raised her hand, put the teacup to her lips, lowered it again. A confluence of sensations washed over him during that brief motion: dust hovering in bright points, the minute grunting breath of the dog, dress fabric folding and stretching, lines of light along the teacups, the hairiness of his hands where they rested on the chair arm, the heavy weave of the upholstery under them, the pressure of his shoes on the floor, his tongue against his teeth as he prepared to speak.

"I must visit you, I must"—his hands raised from the chair arms and made circular motions from the wrists—"we should get to know each other. I'll *visit* the puppy. I'll have to see how he grows. And I can bring him presents. Those things that dogs like to eat that are all different colors. I have a collection of old thread spools—all wooden—I could bring them here for you, would you like that? Perhaps something else too. I could come often. I don't want to move out of my apartment. I could stay here at times. Auntie, don't put me in your will, I would always think, at the back of my mind . . . that I'd wished you dead." He could not comprehend the tears running down his face. He could not connect them to an eccentric old lady or a sleeping young dog. His hands stretched outwards from the wings of the chair like those of a suppliant from a cross. He was trying to reach the wallpaper and draw it to him. His aunt rose, strode around the coffee table and placed one hand on his shoulder. He shuddered a deep, dislodging shudder. His vision, if it had been that, splintered and drifted away. The room regained its normal dimensions. Yet . . . he had pounced.

"I don't want you to die."

"John A, neither do I."



# The Old People

J. W. MAJOR

HE ASKED HER what she was thinking, and she said, Oh so many things, so many past things, childhood things, things long ago. I wanted, I remember, to touch my father before he died. But he was dead. When I touched him there in the coffin it wasn't touching him. I wouldn't kiss him, I remember. Kissing him then wouldn't have been kissing him, would it? He was dead.

He closed his eyes. There was a queer note of triumph in her voice. Over him? She said, He wasn't like you, he was a kind man, so kind and then he died. He pretended to be asleep, but he was sure she was crying now and he didn't want her crying of all things. What's brought this on? he said. We have to have this now? Your mind goes and I go and that's that. You hear, lady?

She made herself still then, and he knew that if he talked she'd say nothing and make the silence deeper and his mind would start crowding with things to say. She had him wide awake, his mouth wet with language. He saw himself in the mirror above her bureau, a shape of something in the stillness.

He eased himself down and tried to sleep, but he was hot behind the eyes. Vivid pictures, absurdly rapid, shaped and fluttered off. We used to make love, he said aloud. But now never. Because you can't cut the mustard. He realized he had shouted, a spiteful old man's shriek.

You will never be him and you never were, she said. Now he could sense her flesh and bones, and enjoyed a brief lustful memory. She shifted the weight of her body and came around to face him, saying, Do you think I would let you touch me, if that were still something you had an inclination to do? You wasted all my life, you know. All of it. She turned again to face the window and to commune secretly over there, perhaps to cry.

He was moved by a pleasurable desire to taunt her, readying several sure phrases. But he remained quiet. Then he said, You're absolutely right. I have no inclination whatsoever to do that. The sound of it pleased him, the way closing a door on her face did. It was the dramatic finality of it, the hopelessness of it. It was surprising how comforting hopelessness had become for him. What have you

wasted? he asked drily, and waited for an answer like a prosecutor skilled at waiting. He refrained from saying, as he always did, I'm the one that's had something to waste. He just began to breathe tiredly, to let her infer that there were so many breaths left him, that language was no more than a tiresome noise made in each other's presence. What is there that anybody can waste? she finally said, and snorted. You're so self-admiring as to be blind, do you know? As to rate yourself as one who wasted his life.

Is that supposed to be deep? he asked. He sounded to himself rather childish, the way certain of his arrogant students had sounded. He would never have permitted that: he had even as a young man an intimidating appearance. Rarely would he smile. He had one of those reputations for being appreciated by students long after they had left school. Was that reputation, as she would ask him, more imagined than actual? He left himself open to this meanness of hers, those inevitable confidences betrayed over and over, how vulnerable it made one to the other, these bodies and souls scourged daily, wounds gaping—and for what? I would have been much better single all these years, he would say, extracting every bit of contempt from his voice so that it might hurt all the more. And she with that air of hers of being used to listening to such things, her shrug, her preoccupation with something of the moment so trivial that she had to squint to see it or think it. What is the difference? she would say. What kind of teacher you were, what they thought of you. It's over. She would smile that small terrible smile that reduced everything to the narrow space between her lips.

I was at least something, he said after a long silence, and she pretended to be awakened, saying, What? What *is* it? He said, Oh, you weren't asleep. How could you be asleep? You couldn't have been asleep, it's not possible.

I was dreaming, she said, and you woke me from that. Of him? he asked. Of your dear father? He didn't care how he spoke of him. She was always showing him another of the endless photographs in which her father struck one of his innumerable poses. Always posing and getting photographed. She saying, Oh he was always being so funny, I used to laugh all the time, I don't remember ever not feeling good when he was around, and he saying, He looks like a small man, I'm amazed at his size next to your mother, why would a man that size marry a woman of her size. It was her fault. She provoked him to say these vindictive things. It's your vanity, she would say. You actually think you are something. He never took himself seriously, that's what was so good about him. You'd think he was somebody, something, he said, and she said, He was something, somebody. He was a fine father.

You're older than your father was when he died, he said sud-

denly, and you still talk like a girl about him. What are you whining about? You're going to die soon enough yourself. He felt queerly invigorated when he talked about the soonness of death. More awake than ever. He couldn't sleep now. He wanted to rouse her out of her silence. He felt as he did in the classroom on certain days, a tyrannous energy possessed him. Under the blankets his body felt lithe and young.

Do you hear what I'm saying? he said. He spoke at the ceiling. There's nothing but poetry and history that remains, he orated, as though his classes sat before him and he walked spryly in front of them, wetting his lips to slow the too quick movement of his tongue. She said, Don't give me that, and moved farther away, to the edge of her side. But I'm telling you something, he went on, in that sharp and somewhat playful way, as though she were his student. It was a version of the voice he used on her when he was a young man, when he took it upon himself to propose to her that he would be her teacher. How it amused her, this smugness of his, these grand plans of his, this petty teacher in him, how small he grew before her, how monotonous this accretion of familiarity made it all. Moments of beautiful coherence is all, he said and felt suddenly weary of the unsaid words, and rose in a tired fury to get out of bed. He stood at the side of the bed for a long moment, not knowing what to say, saying, I thought I heard something out there. I must be going bats.

Oh, you like to say you're going bats when you're not and you like to say I'm going bats, she said. I can't sleep, he said. Then don't sleep, she said. He stared at her in the dark. He couldn't tell what side of her he was looking at, and then he couldn't get a clear picture of her in his mind. Who do you think will go first? he said. Oh come to bed, she said flatly. And stop pretending you think you hear something. He said, You would have loved me all these years if I'd been dead. I would have gotten further and further from you and you would have loved me in proportion to the distance I was separated from you. What's wrong with us is all these years we've been with each other and growing uglier and impotent and cranky with each other. He couldn't speak, he thought he might cry, he was trembly and felt frail and warm toward her. Get into bed, she said. You're all agitated and working yourself up.

He liked to hear her assurances that she knew him. When he got into bed he said, So you don't think I'm going bats? He was smiling but she couldn't see that. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to tell her he was thinking about the beautiful girl with the big breasts, with the big luscious breasts. He wondered whether he could make her say, *Oh yeah?* in the playful way she used to. His tenderness always had to begin with some comedy. It was his way. He'd go on in his comic way, itemizing his faithlessness in thought and deed, the



hilarious product of his silly daydreams and harmless desires. Behind his grim stern face he had imagined many a thing, and this is what made her laugh so. When had he last permitted himself to be rendered into such absurdity? With what bitter regret he would recall this. He would say with desperate spitefulness years later when they were as dry as death lying beside each other in that first death of their bodily lust, I'd like to grab one of them, I felt today like I'd grab one of them. She'd just smile, and he'd see that knowing all over her face and he'd hate that face because it was in essence still the familiar face of their old times. He would threaten to leave and she would sit and be silent, something so heavy and passive in the sitting, so deliberate that he would raise his fists to her and scream. But the more murderous were his feelings the more unequal he felt to her. She grew more solid and remote. Telling him she was off with her father in some long lost enchantment.

You're a bitch, he said suddenly, quietly now, as though it were some amazing but useless discovery. She answered nothing, didn't stir at all. He had a hotness on his chest, a feeling of humiliation or betrayal. He felt he should be pitied for something. But it's too late, he said out loud, his tongue possessed of a will of its own. It is now, she said, but seemingly to somebody who wasn't he. But what are you saying? he said. For what? Late for what? She didn't speak. Nothing but that infernal silent communing with herself or her dead father. Damn you, he said, but knew that by raising his voice her silence would get deeper. What is it? he asked, and almost said her name. He said, I meant it's too late for anything. I'm going to die soon. She said then, Oh you, it's always your death we're hearing about as if there's nobody else's. Don't think you're so important or anybody will care if you do.

I suppose that'll shut me up, is that it? he said. This thought about death was something he wanted to say to her. For how long? He kept thinking there would be a time, and would become dizzy when she wasn't there, having gone to a store or something, with the premonition that he would never be able to say it. He wanted to say he sometimes felt it was something about to happen, close to him, well, something you could hear in the near distance, something coming like footsteps, palpable as breath, a darkness glimpsed, an immeasurable moment of expectation, and then receding, distant and puzzling, as abstract as mathematics, more certain and less real. Oh, he wouldn't ever ever get that into words she would listen to. I should have left you, he said, and she said, as though she knew he would say just that, lying in wait with her trap set, I'm the one that had the chance.



HER WORDS, HE REALIZED, were clear, honed over the years to be used for just such a moment. What chance did you have? he asked. He asked it laughingly. What chance? He was smiling, wearing a face he couldn't recollect as being his own.

He knew, I told him, she said, and he laughed, saying, And is that what is important? That he knew? I don't believe you. His tone was acidulous, but why should he sound like that? This certainly didn't seem to be real to him, even though she sounded real enough. He bit down on his lower lip, he slid down under the blankets. His eyes were wide open, awaiting her voice. When she didn't speak he said, And so what is this chance you had? There was no laughter in his voice, though he intended it to be there. He sounded now as though he were asking a question about a ghost whose presence he half doubted and half feared. Go to sleep, she said. There's nothing.

There's nothing is right, he said fiercely, but felt agonized by her silence. There's nothing is right. But this time there was a plea in his voice, a vagrant grief, and he said adamantly, as though it were he who had been accused, There is nothing and goodnight. But then he said, That's more of his doing. And she sharply, suddenly, more awake than ever, And what has it got to do with him?

He remained silent, smoldering righteously—shouldn't he be? Why should he feel like a child nursing his hurt feelings? Being what she always called childish. He said, You were the one made me hate him. And I did hate him. He wished there were some final awful thing he could say and then nothing more. But he said, You told him that then? as though his saying it this way, with shame, it became a reality. What? he asked her and himself. What did he know of this, whatever it was? She was right in saying now, What does his knowing matter? But he went on, It doesn't matter to you, it doesn't matter to you, he couldn't stand me, you know, I had too much of a mind for him, we can't stand people we're out of our depth with, he had no mind, you know, and you take after him.

He was the man you weren't, she said, and added, I was the one that broke his heart, so quietly and with such assurance as to make him envy the realness of her feelings. So that he laughed scornfully, loud enough to be heard in the next apartment. What is it? he said. You disappointed him? What did he expect from you? What could you have done? You didn't do well enough? She said, I was going to leave you. Don't you think it would have been better? But it doesn't matter, does it? She became silent. What? he said, controlling himself so that he whispered it and sounded like an old fool down on his knees pleading with her. It doesn't matter now, she said, but not with a bit of mockery in her voice. That pretense, he thought, that she means no harm, when she means as much harm as she can mean. He said, Stop saying it doesn't matter. You say it and then say

it doesn't matter. What do you mean it doesn't matter? I'm here and you're there. We're breathing the air of life yet, you know. Who was this? But she was silent and he stared at her as he sat up, as though he could make her mouth open.

It was just somebody I knew, she said. A young man. It was so long ago. Then she became so silent as to make him believe she wasn't there. But she was, making him imagine there was something rich and secret to remember. He said, Not so long ago as to be forgotten, is that it? I want to hear this.

Why? she asked in her old arguer's voice. Fiercely protective of this memory then, he thought, and he felt a dark pity for himself, for a long life wasted. But his life hadn't been for her or in her—and there was life yet. It was something more than that, he said out loud. I mean my life. You weren't my life, you know. He got up out of the bed and walked out to the kitchen where he turned on the light and had a glass of orange juice and came back. She had the bedroom light on now, looking angrily awake. You gave me a headache, she hissed. What is it that you don't leave me alone, you go on and on. He acted indifferent to this mood of hers, yet he feared it. You should know, she said, how he persuaded me otherwise, that man you hate so much. I told him I couldn't take your pompousness and he said—he said I was wrong. She stared into her face in the mirror above the bureau. She looked dry-skinned, gray, and then her mouth opened ever so little, her eyes softening, saying, He was just somebody who sold things, brushes and things for the house. I had him in for a cup of coffee now and then. He didn't come just to sell them. He was in law school. He was a young man.

He remembered her as she was just that moment probably remembering herself, and he said, A young man in law school then, night school then? He was trying to inject a laugh, a sneer, into his voice, but he was trembling. He realized how sure he had been of her, he had never been able to imagine such a thing as this, and how now it was worse than a failure of imagination—and it was worse than if she had been a harlot, a sleep-around. And then what? he said. you took him into our bed.

She smiled at him. Pleased with his hurt, thinking it was some kind of envy, smiling at him as though he were some kind of innocent child? It was the thought of his innocence that amused her? He felt now he could fall apart, there was nothing to him but this carcass he had walked around in all these years. Was that the point of this, to show him what a lot of nothing he was? She said, No no, of course not, and he said, You don't have to spare my feelings, if that's what you think you're doing. But he felt relieved, actually spared—a painful gratitude. His voice got stronger. He said, You don't have to spare my feelings and who needed your old man's two cents?

Saving me from losing you? What a joke. But when he laughed it wasn't laughter that came out. It was a frightful noise, his lungs congested. He wanted to shout but feared he'd break down and cry. He could kill her. He lifted his hands in such a gesture, she looked so full of the intention to make him hate himself. He walked out and went into the living room.

He sat there a long while, as he had so often. How often he had tried to punish her by extracting himself from her presence, only to hear her yawn mockingly from wherever she was. But now he heard nothing from her. He tried to think of some way to get revenge. Several times some mad impulse would dissipate itself. He began to yield to a desire to forgive her so that in some way he could be forgiven. He felt a chilly isolation from her. But this wasn't his doing. What was it he had done? He wasn't the one to be forgiven, and yet he couldn't imagine words he could use to say this was obliterated. Because that was what would have to be done: it would have to be obliterated. He didn't move. He couldn't. An hour must have gone by and they had nothing to say to each other. Then he rose and walked back to the room.

The light was out and she seemed asleep. Are you asleep? he asked. It wasn't the voice he had planned on at all. I know you're not asleep, he went on, so wake up. I want to ask you something. He found an old pleasure in an anticipated cruelty. Years and years to come, he thought, of turning this over and over and looking at it in every possible light. He wouldn't let his voice take on any other tone, it was impossible. She was lying there in a formless heap. Chastised? He imagined her that way. His teeth flashed in the dark, like a wolf's. Get up, he said. What was his two cents put in for? And what was this about breaking his heart? I thought you had a place in his heart. He lisped the words in cruel mimicry. He felt a great power over her now. How small and puzzled and afraid her face must look. And what could you have done to break his heart? he went on. You, the darling of his heart. He waited there, saying, The darling of his heart, the darling of his heart. Then she rose, wide awake all the time, as he had suspected. She said, Unhappiness, unhappiness unhappiness, it was my unhappiness that broke his heart, my marriage to a —my unhappy marriage. Her voice just stopped, as though she had heard something that made her listen. Or she had turned to stone, lost her voice, dead? But she was sitting up, still there and breathing. He tried to think her face into being, but his mind was a blank. He said finally, What does it matter? You always say it doesn't matter now. The room became very still and dark before he started into the bed beside her.

# “Of Refraining To Kill Swallows”

*after Sir Thomas Browne*

JUSTIN CARISIO

They are useless to us, a molestation  
Like encroaching weeds or cold weather,  
And they lack the inspiring presence of other  
Birds: the high undulations  
Of gulls; the larks' encouragement;  
The passage of geese in oblique files.

Yet they graced the atrium tiles  
Of ancient homes—blandishments  
To the gods—so perhaps a quaint fear  
Stays their slaughter, fear or a memory  
Of the Rhodian chorus whose song of greeting  
Ushered in, together, swallows and fair  
Weather, acknowledging their swift glory  
As an emblem in the rebus of spring.

(continued from page 4)

eau's complaint that "The bard has in great measure lost the dignity and sacredness of his office. Formerly he was called a seer, but now it is thought that one man sees as much as another" to the sign recently displayed in the window of the Philadelphia College of Art ("There's An Artist Inside You"), one sees the insidious notion that everybody's capacity to view and comment on the human scene (or some other ability from which art might spring) is sufficient for him to be called artist. (One balks at the notion that everyone is equal in capacity in the first place). Robert Brustein (ironically himself something of an advocate of the idea that talent is enough in his field—theatre) complains that those in charge of dispersing government funds to the arts see them primarily as existing to finance ends that are not in themselves essentially artistic—minority goals, therapy, recreation, the arts and crafts movement. Recently I attended the "arts fair" in a Midwestern city: practically the whole exhibit consisted of pottery which was neither aesthetically pleasing *nor* utilitarian. (Is no one capable of designing a teapot spout that works?) Lately we have come to regard what were formerly thought to be utilitarian skills as potentially artistic—crafts, architecture, photography. But we have no standards, no distinctions as yet in these areas, and we need them: the cult of personal expression and art are not the same thing.



Nor is the recent dignity conferred by the media and academe on popular culture without its problems of standards where art is concerned. I would be far from saying that Scott Joplin, Willie Nelson, and certain industrial designers aren't artists or that they shouldn't be recognized as such. Katherine Hepburn deserves serious consideration as an artist, someone who has evolved a style to match her talent; a minimally talented (let alone technically accomplished) performer like Joan Crawford does not. The embracing of popular culture has blurred the distinction between virtual nontalents (Ruby Keeler, Ginger Rogers, Troy Donahue—make up your own list) and their genuinely gifted and skilled contemporaries. Bing Crosby has begun to receive some attention as a serious singer; he deserves it, for he exemplifies a generation of pop performers who had to show technical mastery before they could be taken seriously by the public. Few pop singers today can even *sing* (Andy Gibb, Deborah Harry, Olivia Newton-John).

I have a theory about stars like this. Audiences love them *because* they aren't very good. Watching each bead of sweat pop off the brow of Joel Grey, Liza Minelli, Lucille Ball, and Debbie Reynolds as they labor their way through a song, dance, or comedy routine without benefit of technical finish tells the audience: that's exactly what we'd be doing if we were up there—sweating it out. The audience member can tell himself that he's as talented as the person on stage. Jerry Lewis is as *talented* as, say, the Marx Brothers. But while they put their talent wholly into creating technical rhythms that sweep us up, he puts part of his into getting us to love him, to identify with him, to equate our lack of talent with his level of performing. Minelli's energies go *entirely* to eliciting our love.

At times this identifying process becomes positively necrophiliac. Talent is only part of hitting a high note, but singers like Beverly Sills and Luciano Pavarotti seem bent on suggesting that it is *all*. Audiences come increasingly to hear them *not* hit that note, to convince themselves that a performer is no surer of succeeding than they would be. They come to see the performer die. Minelli's mother is an even more extreme case in point: late in her career, some of Garland's fans came to see her *literally* dying.

Talent, when left to find its own level (or when forced to stay at a certain level), will invariably atrophy or go to waste. Many have given up, never seized as much as they could have, or, saddest of all, were never given the chance. I suppose one can forgive Ralph Richardson for becoming an out-and-out ham in his old age (though I felt sadness and frustration watching him play Sir Ralph rather than the character he was supposed to be playing in the Broadway production of Pinter's *No Man's Land*). Katherine Hepburn has taken time from her busy career of transforming Hollywood dross into something resembling

art to play roles like Portia and Cleopatra (and even made a contribution to the largely pathetic American comedy of manners by commissioning Philip Barry to write *The Philadelphia Story*), but not much time. Imagine the Eliza Doolittle we'll never see her do. Worst of all, we will never see the Richard II of Robert Preston, one of the most gifted actors I have ever seen. Such waste is a sad commentary on the American audiences that tolerate it and the cultural establishment that causes it.

As I suggested with Crosby, professional (and public) standards used to be stricter and more extensive (i.e., applied to both pop and "serious" artists). Now, it seems, the pros want to look like amateurs. (And vice versa. In a way the amateurs have a better chance, because even elementary training in voice, dance, and instruments has risen so much in the last 25 years or so). The irresponsibility and ignorance on the part of many professionals is having deleterious effects on young performers who aspire to artistry. Meryl Streep is a good example. Trained at Brustein's Yale School of Drama, she is heralded as a great "natural actress." But Streep doesn't understand that there is a difference between integrating talent and technique (i.e., absorbing technique so fully that a performance appears to be spontaneous while it is really rigidly controlled and controlling) and being truly natural (relying on talent alone). I writhed in my seat during the improvisatory scenes in "Kramer vs. Kramer." Streep was literally groping in those scenes; unlike Dustin Hoffman (who really does understand "natural"—i.e., natural-appearing—acting), she obviously had no idea how to make those scenes relate to character, plot, or theme. Streep was probably the greatest acting student in history—she must have laid out Brustein and his colleagues during their little improvisation sessions in New Haven—but she obviously has no idea of where to put her talent. And again, audiences are responding: most of the spectators would share her confusion on a movie set. On a more elemental level, it's fun to watch an actor like Robin Williams until one realizes that unleavened talent is all there is. After that, it's boring.

One of the new (and, I fear, representatively new) comedians—Andy Kaufman—poses an even more serious problem. He ignores context almost completely. What he is doing at any given moment is obviously brilliant, but the spectator is at a loss to tell what its aim is or even what it is. The loss of two elements essential to artistry—distance and context—has had serious consequences in literature as well. These problems I want to deal with in a future editorial.

JCK



# Contributors

**T**he poems, essays, and reviews of R. L. BARTH have appeared widely. He recently published his first collection of poems, *Looking for Peace*, on his own small press. JUSTIN CARISIO is a La Salle alumnus; he lives in Wilmington, Delaware, and his poems have appeared in *FQ*, *Shenandoah*, and elsewhere. After ten years of carpentry and school maintenance, DEREK DAVIS is getting back to writing; as a result his temper has improved and "thumbs have healed." He's a native Philadelphian. BOB FAUTEUX is the associate editor of the new University of Minnesota quarterly, *Research*. His poems have appeared in many small magazines. A former potter and teacher of emotionally disturbed children, and a wife and mother, PAT HAYWARD has been writing seriously only for a year and a half; we're sure our readers will agree that "The Man in the Gazebo" is a considerable achievement, especially for someone so new in the field. She is currently at work on a novel. Welcome back to LEWIS HORNE ("A Small Tone" appeared in our Autumn, 1978 issue). Since then, he's published in *Charlton Review*, *Literary Review*, and *Wascana Review*, and has had some poems in *The Hopwood Anthology* (University of Michigan Press). He teaches at the University of Saskatchewan. J.W. MAJOR has published stories in *The Massachusetts Review*, *Epoch*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Michigan Quarterly*, and *The Kansas City Review*, among others. He's received Honorable Mention in the Martha Foley volumes no less than five times. SISTER MARY LUCINA is secretary to the coordinators of her order's schools and hospitals in Buffalo. She has published poems in *Skullpolish*, *Light*, and *Connecticut River Review*.

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